

Big Ten Conference Crisis Communication Tied to Four Extended Sexual Violence Cases

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College sport plays a special role unifying the campus and community and serves as a key source of entertainment. However, there are also times when sport reflects unappealing elements of society (Hums & MacLean, 2013), leading managers to make ethics-based decisions (Hums, Wolff, & Morris, 2012). College sport is no exception as evidenced by four cases of extended sexual violence conducted by members of the athletics staffs of University of Michigan, Michigan State University, Ohio State University, and Penn State University between the 1970s and 2010s.

The University of Michigan case, focused on football team doctor Robert Anderson, involved more than 1,000 victims including Michigan student-athletes and other patients (Murphy, 2021) from the 1970s to the 1990s (Jesse, 2020). Michigan football players called for the University President to resign (Murphy, 2021b) a \$490 million settlement was reached with victims in 2022 (Harding, 2022). That settlement came just a few years after the 2018 Michigan State University settlement for \$500 million following the Larry Nassar case. Nassar was an Associate Professor and sports physician at MSU who sexually abused hundreds of girls and women—with more than 300 girls and women stepping forward to speak about Nassar's improprieties (Levenson, 2018). In May 2020, Ohio State University paid \$41 million to settle lawsuits related to claims by 162 victims that they were sexually abused by Ohio State team doctor Richard Strauss (Futty, 2020). Anderson's actions allegedly occurred from 1979-1998 and involved at least 177 victims (Futty, 2020). Penn State University football coach Jerry Sandusky was alleged to have sexually abused 10 over a 15-year period and faced 52 charges (Simpson, 2012). Penn State University paid 26 Sandusky sexual abuse victims \$59.7 million in settlements in 2013 (Drape, 2013). PSU also paid Sandusky whistle-blower Mike MacQueary, who served as a member of the PSU football staff when he reported witnessing Sandusky abusing a boy only to be fired for reporting what he witnessed, \$7.3 million after losing a subsequent defamation case (Tracy, 2016). While these cases date back well into the previous century, the Sandusky/Penn State case was the first to be known to the public in 2001 despite Penn State football head coach Joe Paterno knowing about Sandusky's issues as early as 1976 (Tracy, 2016).

Documents and quotes issued by University officials tied to the four scandals were analyzed utilizing Benoit's image repair theory. Benoit's theory requires and offensive act and someone being

held accountable for that offensive act who is then seeking to restore his or her image (Benoit, 1997). The five main image repair strategies include denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing the offensiveness of the act, corrective action, and mortification. Mortification involves an apology for having committed the act (Benoit 1997). Corrective action and mortification are considered the two most effective of the five image repair strategies (Benoit & Drew, 1997).

This is the first sports image repair theory article to take a longitudinal approach to how multiple sports institutions handled a similar issue—in this case, how Big Ten Conference schools handled issues of long-term sexual violence on their campuses. The researchers found that while mortification was sometimes expressed, it was often muddled or combined with denial or other deflectors. Similarly, while corrective action may have been promised on occasion, there were occasions where conflicting or deflecting comments or other facts seemed to weaken these statements. Statements of denial and reducing of the offensiveness of the act often seemed to be easier for the schools to commit to than the more effective mortification and corrective action options. This study is complete and ready for presentation.